

Strategy for Mission Among the Fulbe (part two)

A strategy for Christian witness must be based on basic premises: Christian witness must be made in term of Christian relationships. To win the Fulbe missionaries must be willing to live among them—and live like them. The Gospel needs to be communicated in the context of friendships with the Fulbe. It must also be able to flow along indigenous lines of leadership and communication patterns.

by Larry Vanderaa

In this part of the article I want to talk openly and frankly. I have a confession to make. I used to be a strategy nut. I loved to think about and draw up strategies. I loved to wrestle endlessly with goals, and methods, and principles, and project descriptions. I was forever searching for that key that would unlock the Fulbe for Christ. It had to be there somewhere: that redemptive analogy, that bridge, that parable, that act of love that would just suddenly turn on the lights, draw the Fulbe willy-nilly to Christ.

I also knew, at least intellectually, that it is the Spirit who opens eyes, draws people to Christ, but the last few years this has been brought home to my heart. I know without a doubt that I alone will never convert a single Pullo. At the same time it seems that the Holy Spirit, working alone, does not convert the Fulbe either. He could, but he does not. He somehow, in some way, needs us, but not always in the way we think he does.

In 1984 we moved from Liberia to Mali and began to prepare for work among the Fulbe. We had done a lot of survey work in West Africa, we had carefully studied the Fulbe situation in Mali and developed a Strategy. The Strategy was based on several basic premises:

First, a conviction, based on experience and research that we had read, that people come to Christ through other Christians. There is research in North America which states that more than 80% of new converts cite Christian friends, relatives, or fellow workers as the primary force that brought them to Christ. Christian radio, for example, was only cited by 4%. The articulated gospel, divorced from experienced Christian love, does not communicate to the vast majority of people. If this is true in the West where we give top priority to efficiency, progress, and ideas, this would be even more true in Africa where human relationships are given top priority.

Second, the Fulbe in Mali, as most Muslims, had many misperceptions about Christianity but most had never had any contact with Christians. No missionaries nor evangelists nor even Christians had ever lived among most of the Fulbe in Mali. This was untouched territory, unplowed soil. This was 1850 as far as missions in Africa was concerned. Given the first premise, we knew that it was going to take more than preaching for the Fulbe to see Christ: we, as Christians, had to go live among the Fulbe. The Fulbe would have to be able to peer into the hearts and souls of real live

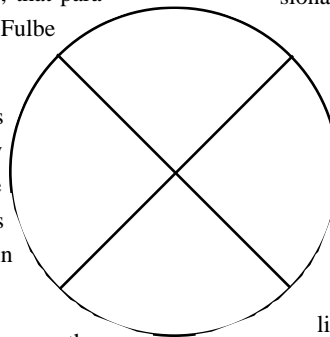
Christians to see what they were made of, to see that they trusted God, to see and experience Christian compassion. We would have to scatter several missionaries to live in several areas

among the Fulbe to be what we often call “front-line” Christians, to establish Christian presence, to build spiritual credibility.

Third, to become intimately involved in the lives of the Fulbe, it was

deemed necessary to live as much like the Fulbe as possible. This would serve to help Fulbe to feel comfortable in our hut/home as well as indicate to the Fulbe that one could be a Christian and still live as Fulbe. By identifying with their lifestyle, their mats, their cattle, their food, their clothes, we would be indirectly affirming Fulbe culture in Jesus’ name.

Fourth, it was hoped that in so doing the gospel would in time come to the Fulbe, not so much as something lobbed in from the outside, like a rock thrown over a wall, but rather would well up from deep inside of their communities and culture. The gospel would be communicated in the context of



friendships with Fulbe, in an indigenous, contextualized manner. We decided that instead of calling ourselves missionaries, we would call ourselves Jesus *marabous*—in other words marabous who taught the *Linjiila*. We hoped that this would give us an accepted forum from which to evangelize in a natural, unobtrusive manner. Subsequently the gospel would be largely spread from relative to relative, family to family along traditional channels of communication. The picture would be more of a small match that sets a whole prairie on fire rather than a lightning bolt that burns up one tree.

Fifth, there were a number of other fundamental ideas:

First of all a strong emphasis on indigenization and contextualization was needed since it was felt the better this was done, the more easily the gospel would spread and transform lives and culture at deep levels.

Secondly, we would first attempt to reach the leaders of society—the older generation, the heads of family, the chiefs,

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the marabous, and the former noble class—but without ignoring other classes of people. As mentioned above, to facilitate this task we would call ourselves Jesus marabous thus giving us status in society.

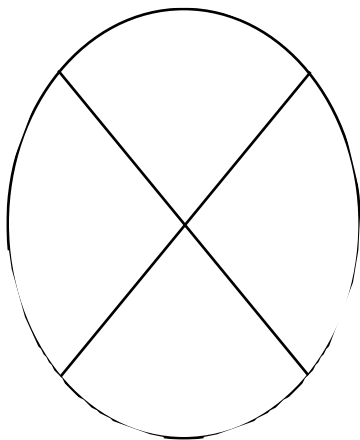
Thirdly, we would integrate word and deed into a seamless kind of witness.

Fourth, there was a strong emphasis on kingdom, that is preaching, demonstrating, and extending God's sovereignty over all areas of a new believers life.

Last of all, we would de-emphasize mass evangelism tools since it was felt that these would only invite opposition from the marabous and polarize the community and undermine our insider approach.¹

So with strategy in hand but almost no Fulfulde in our minds, my wife, Ann, and our four children (ages 3 to 12) moved to our village in the north of Mali on Jan 1, 1986 to become a Jesus marabou. It was a nine hour drive from Bamako and as we traveled farther and farther from Bamako, the road progressively deteriorated until we were following little more than tracks in the sand. Because of car trouble and other unexpected delays, we didn't arrive in our village until after dark. Being as yet unfamiliar with the terrain, it was light from the cookfires that guided us the last kilometer into our village. We were welcomed with a meal and traditional tea by the village. The celebration continued till midnight. The next morning we were awakened by villagers at the crack of dawn. While lying there staring up at the sky through gaps in the thatch roof of our hut, reality slowly sunk in. This was not some guest hut, this was our hut. Even though we felt like running, we were committed to stay. How were we to live in a few grass huts with no electricity, no running water, sand floors, no fridge, and the worst shock was yet to come: no privacy? At least that's the way it felt. For the next week we had people from dawn to dusk. We wondered if we were going to crack. Finally the lead woman said to Ann, "we hope you don't feel bad, we don't want to offend you, but we just can't hang around here all the time, we have got to get back to work!" This had been a classic clash of cultures: the Fulbe showing hospitality while we were desperate for some privacy. And so life settled into a routine of language and culture learning, albeit still with plenty of visitors.

I certainly could not be a very impressive marabou. We were like babes in the woods. We had to be shown everything. And they taught us how to live in that harsh context—in the Fulbe way. They fixed up our huts with beautiful Fulbe mats—the Fulbe way. They showed us how to make tea—the Fulbe way. They showed us what to wear and what to eat. They taught us how to speak Fulfulde—according to them the real Fulbe Fulfulde. I tried to milk and herd cattle, Ann tried to weave mats, the children became involved with their friends. We attended naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals. We bought cattle and oxen and a plow and made our own millet field. We tried as much as we could to become part of the fabric of Fulbe life. At first the days were long and interesting. Later on they became long and tedious as one day ran on into another. Periodically, every 4-6 weeks or so, we would return to what felt like our real home in Bamako for a couple weeks of being Americans again. While there we would take care of all those aspects of the missionary task that could not be easily done from the village such as attending to administrative matters, writing supporters, technical aspects of language study etc. In essence we did all the work of a missionary, but divided it up into two geographical areas. Because of what we could accomplish in Bamako, we were able to be available to the Fulbe 100% of the time while in the village.



We wanted to setup a prayer hut next to our huts, spend time in prayer in that hut, and also invite interested Fulbe to do Bible study and pursue religious discussion there. The idea was that this would become kind of a religious focal point, holy ground if you like. It all had a vaguely mystical tinge.

We have found our times in the village to be both grueling and rewarding, boring and exciting, tiring and invigorating. To be honest, we are not always sure we have done the necessary thing. Would there have been a better strategy? Surly a less tiring one. Could we not have lived more comfortably in a larger center and carried out evangelism campaigns and forays into the countryside? Has it been worth it? Have there been results? I am sure these kinds of questions are running through your minds.

Let me tell you more of the story first. Through 1986, 1987, and 1988, we largely learned language, observed culture, made lots of friends, attempted to introduce an early millet, gave out medicines and carried out many other small acts of compassion. On a few occasions we read some Scripture to some villagers, but our verbal witness was limited by our still developing language skills and was largely informal—on occasion with friends as opportunities arose. I also built a good relationship with the Imam of our village.

After a Home Service in 1989, this process was continued to mid-1991. An oxen project was started, language skills improved, and I spent increasing time in religious discussion with various people, basically researching how to communicate the gospel so the Fulbe would understand. Slowly I attempted to flesh out the identity of a Jesus marabou. From the beginning, every morning I went into the bush just outside of the village for devotions and prayer. Their marabous do this at times in order to have some privacy for study. Occasionally we would pray over the many sick that were brought to us or for other requests. Sometimes people would ask us to pray for them. Men would be in my hut much of the day. Sometimes Scripture would be read, sometimes I could “seize the moment” to give a witness, sometimes hour after apparently fruitless hour would drift by.

Among others, during this time I spent time with an older marabou of our village. He had once been powerful and well known, but had since lost much of his former stature. He felt Islam had failed him, that all his careful observance of Islamic ritual had been in vain. We discussed Christianity and the Bible, but it became apparent that he was only searching for *innde Alla* in Christianity, some of the magic verses he was sure existed in the Bible which would restore him to power and wealth. He was not interested in a savior Jesus. There was also an old man from a neighboring village who one day showed me his *talki*. He was quite proud of them and said that they protected him from a number of threatening evils. I said that I too had a *talki*, the most powerful one of all. I then talked of Jesus. Since that time, he visits every time we are in the village and he listens to teaching from the New Testament. He fingers

his beads and mumbles the names of Jesus and Moses. I also give him a thousand francs or two now and again; he returns with a gift chicken from time to time. I sometimes call him my rice Christian, but gospel is being communicated.

During this period I especially spent a lot of time with our Imam. We read all of Matthew together and we would talk about Jesus. He would always say at the end of it, “when I see Jesus I will follow him...” And I would always say that would be too late. During this period I would often go to the mosque for the evening prayers and would sit and chat with the older men. Sometimes we talked about Jesus. They would then go into the mosque for prayers. They never invited me in and I don’t think I would have joined them if they had, and so I would sit behind the mosque in a Muslim fashion with open hands and pray, pray hard for those inside.

We also began to plan for a more intensified application of the Jesus marabou model to begin in mid-1991. We rallied prayer support, we prepared Scriptures, we discussed Strategy. What was developing in my mind at that time was to setup a prayer hut next to our huts, spend time in prayer in that hut, and also invite interested Fulbe to do Bible study and pursue religious discussion there. The idea was that this

would become kind of a religious focal point, holy ground if you like. It all had a vaguely mystical tinge.

The details were never fleshed out since as we were moving closer to implementation, trouble struck. We were surprised by Tuareg rebels in late June 1991. They attacked a village 30 kilometers east of us and I was called into the government headquarters to evacuate the wounded since I had the only vehicle in the area. As I pulled into headquarters, an army pickup came in from the south and they went for the wounded. I returned home. At midnight we were awakened by our chief and informed that the army pickup had been ambushed and all aboard had been killed. Our host, our *njaatigi* with whom I had spent many days and weeks in language study, had also traveled in that direction on his horse the same morning. The next morning we learned that he had also been caught in the ambush and killed. He had been captured by the Tuaregs and commanded to give up his horse,

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but in proud Fulbe warrior tradition, he refused to dismount even though he was unarmed and outnumbered. They shot him off his horse. Later that day the wounded turned up in our village on donkey carts and I took them to the nearest hospital five hours drive away. I returned to our village for a few days and then was forced to evacuate to Bamako. We were not able to return to our village for five months. The road to our area was cut off by rebels, but later there was a military presence in the nearby government headquarters and so we were able to return to our village by plane (we had earlier cleared an airstrip) for brief two week visits. But often we would hear gunfire in the distance, once awakened in the middle of the night by heavy machine gun fire just two kilometers away as the soldiers fended off what turned out to be an imaginary attack.

It was a tense time, but relationship building continued and in 1994 there was an increase in discussions about Jesus. The Fulbe more and more frequently asked about Jesus' return when they believed he would usher in a time of peace and plenty. The Fulbe were afraid and unsure because of the rebellion and religion was on their minds. On more than one occasion I took part in prayer meetings concerning the rebel situation. These meetings were held behind the mosque, everyone sitting helter-skelter. The Koran was recited and private and public prayers given. They were not at all unlike evangelical prayer meetings. I was even asked to pray and I did so clearly in Jesus' name.² Sometime during that period I had my last discussion with our Imam about Jesus. One day he told me he didn't want to hear any more of it. Two months later he died.

The rebellion ended in March 1995. It was like someone turned off the tap, it was over. We spent the rest of 1995 regrouping. We began to help villagers with the repair of wells that had been destroyed by the war, with the rebuilding of huts, and in other ways. Ann was able to expand her craft project, we expanded the oxen project, and we intervened because of a bad harvest year in 1995. However, the rest of 1995 was also a busy year for evangelism. With the end of the rebellion, suddenly a few men in our village began to come off and on for Bible study. They came secretly in the evening and during the heat of the day while most were taking siesta. For example, in 1995 I spend 16 hours in Bible study with our chief's oldest son. He would sneak into one of our huts for an hour of study several days a week. At first everything seemed very genuine, he even claimed to have a vision of Jesus. But slowly the begging increased until his real motives became clear. In September 1995, in the context of expanding the oxen project, I made an announcement in six villages of the area that we would do Bible study with anyone who was interested. Over the next months six men came to our village and said they were interested and some study was done with a few, but the others never returned.

For the most part, however, evangelism activities continued as before with informal one on one contacts. There were several others during this period and also the beginning of one of the more remarkable stories. Kumba came to Ann one day and said she was going to yet another marabou to pay him to make a fetish that would draw her children back to her side. Her husband had divorced her and taken her children away. Kumba said she knew it wouldn't work but what else to do? So Ann said that they could pray together in the name of Jesus. So Kumba offered the money to Ann to do the prayers, which Ann of course refused. So Kumba came everyday to Ann for prayer in Jesus name that her children would be returned to her. Sometimes they would also read some Scripture together, but always the prayer without fail.

But as we moved into 1996 we began to feel discouraged. Nothing seemed to be developing with most of our evangelism contacts. Some had lost interest. Frustration was setting in. In addition, the development projects began eating up more and more of our time. It seemed that as our projects and aid to the people increased, so did the requests for even more aid. Some days we could have as many as 15-20 requests for help. Some we could help, most we had to turn away, there was much soul searching and guilt over being rich Christians in a desperately poor context. However, we had not come to put the Fulbe on the track to economic health. We had come to show them Jesus, the way to eternal life. We knew the projects showed Christian compassion, and they did put me into contact with many people, with some of whom I was able to talk about Jesus, including some Moors, but what about my identity as a Jesus marabou? A good marabou is ideally quite inactive, spending much of his time studying and teaching the Koran. It felt like everything was flying out of control. In this context in June we made three decisions:

The first was to upgrade our housing and get comfortable. We were tired of sand floors and leaky huts, but eventually we changed our minds, if for no other reason than to continue to serve as a model for our new missionaries.

Secondly we decided to begin investigating working in urban areas where the Fulbe may be more open and less afraid to show interest in the gospel. It was increasingly coming to our attention that the Fulbe who showed interest in the gospel were those who had traveled, who had been exposed to Christians. Could there be many such Fulbe in the urban areas? Three months after making this decision, the CMA in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire, invited us to disciple two Fulbe who had become Christians in response to their work among Muslims. We began working with them in the beginning of this year. The two have now become three and two have been baptized. A 55 year old marabou and his three friends have heard hours of gospel. They are very drawn to what they hear, but are as yet undecided. We have also shown the Jesus film twice with good response. The potential for evangelism is high. There are large populations of Mali Fulbe in all the cities of Côte d'Ivoire. We hope to expand this effort to Bamako and now have contacts in a couple other urban centers. We feel this has been a good decision. It is consistent with our overall strategy and will hopefully lead to the development of more front-line Christians.

Third, we decided it was time to become more aggressive and "go public" with our evangelism efforts in our village. During the rainy season I prepared an extensive series of evangelism presentations in Fulfulde. We wrestled in prayer before the Lord on how to go about this and whether we should pursue it since we sensed that in some respects this was going against our original strategy. This was a move away from quietly inserting the gospel deep into Fulbe society. This was going to be a public statement, a statement which could change everything.

Let me continue with Kumba's story. Ann and Kumba continued in prayer for over a year. Kumba never missed a day. One day in July 1996, Kumba came running over to our hut and informed us that Jesus had answered her prayers. Her former husband and his new wife and all the children were moving back permanently to our village. Her children would be near her again. She then began to wonder what other things she could pray for. She became more interested in Bible study. She began to see answers to other prayers and to lead the prayers with Ann and pray on her own at home. She also began to talk more openly about her new faith. At that point a simple

faith, but growing. The following event would deeply impact Kumba.

In October during a one month stay in the village I asked our chief and an elder if I could give some presentations to the villagers to show them what was in the *Linjiila*. They agreed and I gave five sessions. The attendance increased from 15 to over 30 by the fourth session. The chief and head elder came as well as a good mix of young and old adults. Kumba was the first woman to come and by the fourth session she had brought several others with her. The most prominent marabou in our village, the old Imam's son, came to the first and fourth sessions. In the sessions I talked about Jesus' return, about the prophecies regarding Jesus, about the authorities of Jesus, about the *barake* of Jesus, and finally about why he came and how he conquered sin and death. The marabou was at this last and climactic session. He was not pleased, neither was he ignorant of the gospel. In addition to having spent many hours with his father, the old Imam, I had given him an Arabic Bible and together we had read all of Genesis, Matthew, and Acts in Fulfulde and Arabic. We had discussed religious matters at length. Even so, or maybe because of this knowledge, he was afraid of the attention the sessions were attracting. That evening at the mosque he bawled out the people for continuing to go to these sessions and struck fear into their hearts. He asked the chief and the elder if they thought what I said was true. They said they did. He asked them why. They said it was because unlike the marabous, these Christians practice what they preach. This is not because we are some sort of super-Christians, far from it, but Christians are different.

The next morning was strange because no one came to greet or visit. Later that day we were told what happened at the mosque by Kumba and later by Dayibu, our worker. We began to dare to hope, but that afternoon at a planned fifth session, only three people showed up, including our chief, while most went to a competing session with the marabou. For two days no one came to greet or visit, we sat alone, shunned. It was one of the most disturbing experiences of our years in the village. All these people who had been our constant companions, greeting daily, suddenly nowhere to be found. We realized that we were experiencing, but only partially, what it must feel like for a new convert to be shunned and ostracized from friends and family, even one's own parents who had lovingly raised him. We really have no idea what that means especially in an African context where human relationships and family connections are the top priority, where rugged, American, go-it-alone individualism is not the norm. During the sessions in our village, I also went to two other villages to gain permission to teach the *Linjiila*. Both of these villages have benefited extensively from our development projects, but both refused permission. They were pleased to take our help, but would not accord the honor of listening to our words. We were in despair. Had we thrown 11 years to the wind?

What we do may be more important than what we say. To put it another way, the Fulbe are watching us more than listening to us.

On the surface things slowly began to return to normal, but we didn't want normal anymore. Whether things are still normal under the surface, we do not know. The jury is still out. We know the sessions did benefit some: Kumba came to all the sessions sitting inside one of our grass walled huts just out of sight of the men. She was grounded in her faith confessing that Jesus is our righteousness from God. She brought four other women to the later sessions, she began talking quite openly about her faith, and she quit doing the fast and the Muslim prayers. She also tried to organize some teaching sessions with the women. About this time she had a vision of Jesus calling our villagers to himself, she and we were by his side and some villagers joined us, but others did not. She was a breath of fresh air in an otherwise discouraging situation. Dayibu, our worker who had professed faith three years earlier but shown little signs of growth, also showed renewed interest and commitment to the gospel. The sessions also sparked a number of lengthy private discussions with three marabous and our chief showed keen interest in the gospel. For the rest we do not know, but we do know there was a lot of openness. Maybe this will bear fruit someday, we wait and pray.

There are three things that this experience and our years in the village are making increasingly clear:

1. What we do may be more important than what we say. Or to put it another way, the Fulbe are watching us more than listening to us. We have always sensed that this was the case, but it was affirmed by the chief's very telling response to the marabou when he asked why they thought what we said was true. "Because they live what they preach," responded the chief. Our life had earned us the right to be listened to. We had another man from another village come to us who had been drawn to the gospel during his travels in Benin where he had come into contact with Christians. His French was inadequate to understand the gospel, he said, but these Christians lived out the will of God better than anyone he had seen. He wanted what they had. In fact many of the Fulbe we know who have shown interest in the gospel have had some sort of prolonged contact with Christians in the past, often citing the lives of these Christians as having powerful impact. We may spend hours agonizing over when to preach, how to preach, what to say, while the Fulbe are watching how we live. This is not to say that we shouldn't verbalize the gospel, but we need to first and foremost live Christ.
2. While the leadership, the marabous and the chiefs, feel threatened by the gospel and the religion it represents, there appears to be considerable curiosity among the rank and file. In one of the villages that refused my request, the main leader of the village is a relatively powerful marabou with whom I have worked quite closely in one of our development projects. He and his brother, the village chief, were opposed to my request in spite of which there was a small group of Maccuƴe, former slaves, who wanted me to come. It was finally decided by the village that those who were interested should go to our village for study. None have as yet dared to come. In our village, too, the people came eagerly to the sessions until the marabou struck fear in their hearts.
3. The Fulbe are looking for *diina*, a kingdom. As to having a holistic view of life, the Fulbe are much more Biblical than we are. When we present Christianity we usually tend to preach the narrow gospel—that is we preach salvation which leads to eternal life. This is the kernel truth, but for the Fulbe religion and life cannot be separated and thus religion is implicated in every area of life. They are wondering: if I become a Christian, will I have food to eat, will my cattle do well, will I be defended if someone takes me to court, who will protect me from injustice, will I be healthy, will my family relationships remain intact, what about my fields, will I be protected from evil powers, can I keep my culture, and, yes, what about eternal life? When

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they sense that another system, lets say the Christian system, responds to all these problems, that it is a full-orbed holistic system, then they will be ready to switch allegiances. At this point the Fulbe in our area are watching. I think many are attracted by what they see, but they are afraid of their neighbors, of the marabous, of their own relatives.

It should also be said that the Fulbe will not be attracted to an ideology. They need a real flesh and blood person who will serve as arbiter, defender, and establisher of the *diina* and the ideology it represents. I don't know if I have the gifts to do that; I don't know if any expatriate can do this; I don't know that it is wise for an expatriate

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to attempt it; our role may only be to prepare the way. What is needed is a Fulbe Christian, filled by the Spirit with humility, love, and courage who is willing to confront the physical and spiritual powers through prayer, healings, exorcisms, preaching, compassionate service, and fighting injustice. The marabous will never fear a faceless ideology, a new theology, but they do fear being swept away by a new *diina*, a new power they cannot control that confronts all of life.

If a rival system were to be put in place and Fulbe were to transfer their allegiances, this would be revolutionary. The masses would abandon their present leadership. There would be much social change and upheaval. The question we are beginning to ask ourselves is this: should we as a mission consciously, strategically, foment such activity? Can we? We have begun to analyze our different activities among the Fulbe to determine which aid and abet the status quo and which do not. Our strategy, as explained above, was to be insiders, to cause the gospel to well-up from inside Fulbe society, but hopefully bringing along with it blocks of the present leadership. The question is to what extent does one coddle those who have the most power to thwart our goals? In our village and the neighboring village I had cultivated my relationship with the marabou leadership only to see them close down and refuse the teaching of the *Linjiila*.

We seem to have three options: first, continue to patiently work on the leadership. Second, continue to teach one on one with common Fulbe drawing them one by one to Christ. Third, blowing our “cover” by making mass appeals to the masses in an effort to enkindle a people movement to Christ. The latter of course is risky and can result in being quickly shut down by local Muslim leadership and being kicked out of the area. It could also start a reformation. Timing would be crucial—that is keeping in time with the Spirit.

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